

Tim and the Hidden People

The Cave of the Wind Witches

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Ray Mutimer



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Arun didn't hear Tim cry out, as the waves swept down on the boat. But he saw him pointing upwards. He looked up, and saw the wind witches swooping down on them out of the storm.

They swept right down over the boat, and as the great wave crashed over them, two of the witches seized Alan Tremaine, and carried him up into the air with a cry of triumph. The sky was split by a great flash of lightning, and as the thunder crashed above him, Arun found himself struggling in the cold sea.

Like Tim, Arun went down, as the great wave swept right over him. He fought his way up through the water, but before he could breathe, another wave crashed down over his head.

Arun felt as if his chest was bursting. He must breathe. He struggled in the water. Suddenly, he found himself being pushed upwards. Some creature was under him, carrying him along. His head was pushed up, out of the waves. He breathed in great gasps of air, and took a quick look around him. He was riding towards the shore on the crest of a wave, on the back of a great seal.

The seal's head came up just in front of him. Arun got his arm round its neck. He was half sitting, half lying, on the great seal's body, as the seal made for the distant shore. The seal rose on the crests of the waves. The water washed over him from time to time, but Arun found that he could breathe between the waves.



Half an hour later Arun rode in on the waves, back to the cove which they had left in the boat.

As they came in towards the shore, Arun slipped off the seal's back, and waded in.

He struggled up the beach, until he was out of reach of the waves. Then he turned and looked back. The black clouds were already blowing away, and the sky was lighter. He could see the seal, riding on the waves, a little way out, watching him. Arun waved. The seal barked, dived into the water, and was gone.

Arun looked up at the sky, and the cliffs all round the cove. There was no sign of the wind witches, or of Alan Tremaine.

He looked along the sands, but there was no sign of Tim, or of Sebastian. He shivered with cold. What had happened to Tim? Arun felt very lonely and unhappy, as he stood in the cold wind.

"The seals would save Tim, too, if they could," he said to himself. "They'll have saved him – if the wind witches didn't get him first! I wish I knew where he was."



The sky was growing lighter. The storm was over. The sun would be up soon. Arun thought he remembered that Tim had once said that the wind witches could only fly at night, or in a storm. They would have to hide somewhere, if the sun came up. They must be somewhere near by. They hadn't had time to get far away.

Arun looked along the shore, and saw something like a little bundle of dark cloth lying on the edge of the waves. He stumbled over to it, and looked down. It was Sebastian.



Arun cried out, and dropped down beside the little cat. Sebastian lay without moving. Arun touched him, and he felt wet and cold.

“Sebastian!” cried Arun. “Sebastian! You’re not dead, Sebastian? Sebastian!”

He picked up the little cat, and carried him gently up the beach. He sat down out of the wind, and put his ear against Sebastian’s side.

For a moment he heard nothing. And then he heard Sebastian’s heart beating, very faintly.

Arun put the little cat down gently on the sand. He pulled off his jersey. He wrung the jersey out, and put it on again. Then he picked up Sebastian, and put him under his jersey, with his head sticking out, holding him close to try to make him warm.



“Sebastian,” he said softly. “Sebastian! You must live, Sebastian. You must live.”

He felt Sebastian move.

“Sebastian!” he whispered again. “Sebastian!”

Sebastian opened his mouth, and gave a faint mew.

Arun looked down at his head. Sebastian opened his eyes, and shut them again quickly.

Arun pulled out his handkerchief. It was very wet. He wrung out the handkerchief, and gently wiped Sebastian’s eyes. Sebastian opened them again. Arun heard a faint noise, and bent his head down. Sebastian gave a little, faint purr.

Arun felt a wave of happiness sweep over him.

At least Sebastian was alive, and Sebastian was one of the Strange Ones. He would know how to find Alan Tremaine – perhaps he would know where Tim was.

Sebastian slipped down, and out from under Arun's jersey. He seemed to be recovering very quickly. He stood on the sand, staring out to sea. Then he turned to Arun.

“Rrrrr?” he asked. The sound was a question.

“The wind witches took Alan Tremaine,” said Arun. “And – and I haven't seen Tim, Sebastian. I haven't seen him since the waves sank the boat. But one of the seals saved me. He carried me here, to the beach. Perhaps the seals saved Tim, too.”

Sebastian turned, and looked out over the sea again. The sky was much lighter. The clouds had gone. The sun would be up soon.

“The witches can't have gone far, Sebastian,” said Arun. “They only fly at night, don't they? They must be near here, somewhere.”

Sebastian looked at him quickly. Then he went slowly towards some rocks by the cliff. Arun saw a little waterfall there, where a stream ran down. Sebastian stopped to drink, and Arun cupped his hands and drank too. He was very thirsty, after all the salt water he had swallowed. There was a pile of dead sticks at the foot of the cliff. Sebastian made his way over to it. He stared at the sticks, and began to twitch and wave his long tail.



As Arun watched, the sticks began to smoke.

They burst into flames. Sebastian might be very wet but he could still work magic. He was making a fire.

Arun saw some sticks and pieces of old wood washed up on the beach. Some of them were under the rocks. He collected some dry ones, and put them on the fire.

Sebastian sat down beside it, and began to wash himself.

Arun sat down himself, as close to the fire as he could. He was very cold. He pulled off his jersey and anorak. He held the jersey out to the fire. It began to steam.



Arun spread the jersey on a rock, put on the wet anorak, and went off to look for more wood. He was soon back with an armful of sticks. He built up the fire. The sun came up, and shone down on them. Arun began to feel better. But he was very tired.

Sebastian sat by the fire, washing himself. Arun could see that he wasn't going to look for Tim or Alan Tremain – not yet. Arun thought that Sebastian was right. They were much too tired to do anything but sleep. He felt his own eyes closing. He lay down on the sands by the fire, closed his eyes, and slept.

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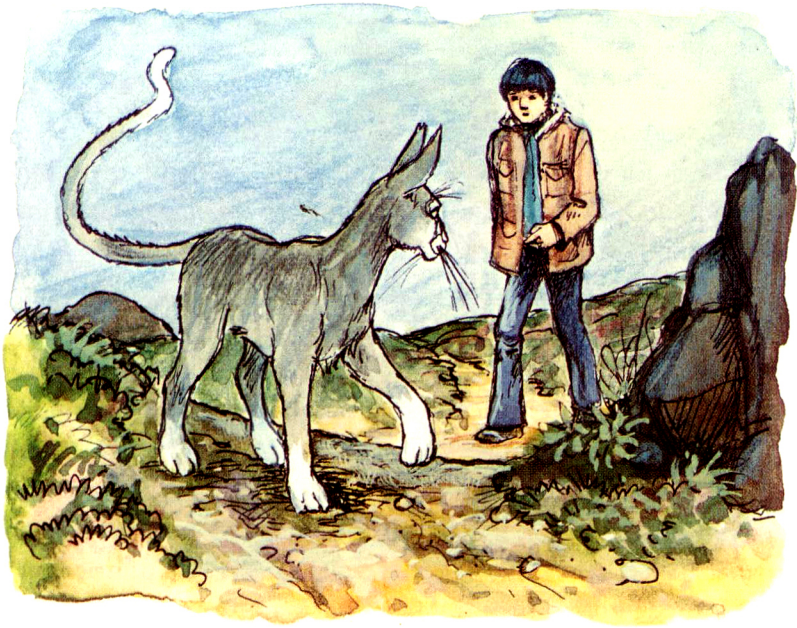
When Arun woke up, the sun was still high in the sky. He had slept for only a few hours, but he felt much better. He sat up, and looked around him. The fire was nearly out, and Sebastian had gone.

He was just wondering where the little cat was, when he heard him call, “Rrrrrr!” He looked up, and saw him coming down the cliffs, jumping from one rock ledge to the next.

Arun picked up his jersey. It was almost dry. He slipped off his anorak and pulled it on. He put the anorak on over it, and went across to meet Sebastian. The little cat ran to him, and rubbed himself against Arun’s legs. Then he ran back to the cliff. He looked back over his shoulder. He jumped up on to a ledge of rock, and looked back again.

Arun could see that Sebastian wanted him to follow him. He climbed up on to the ledge. Sebastian climbed up higher. Arun looked up. There was a long, wide crack in the cliffs above his head, leading upwards. He found a foothold and began to climb up after Sebastian. Sebastian climbed higher and higher. Every few minutes, he stopped, and looked back to make sure that Arun was following.

It was a long climb, but Sebastian had found a good way up the cliff, and at last Arun found himself scrambling over some rocks, on to the heather at the cliff’s edge.



Sebastian rubbed himself against Arun's legs, and purred. It was clear that he was pleased that Arun understood him so well.

Arun bent down and stroked him.

"Where do we go now, Sebastian?" he asked.

Sebastian ran off into the heather, and looked back again. Arun followed him. Sebastian ran on ahead. Sebastian seemed to know where he was going. He was following a sheep track, along the edge of the cliffs. It ran through stones and rocks and heather. Arun made his way along it as quickly as he could.



They had been going along the track for about half an hour, when they came to some big rocks. Sebastian stopped, and waited for Arun. When Arun came up, Sebastian crept forward, slowly and carefully. Every few steps, he stopped to listen.

Arun could tell that Sebastian wanted him to creep forward, too. He dropped on to his hands and knees.

They made their way among the rocks to the edge of the cliff. Sebastian stopped again. Arun looked over the edge, and saw that steps had been cut in the rock. They led down to a wide, grassy ledge. A little way along the ledge, he could see bushes growing.

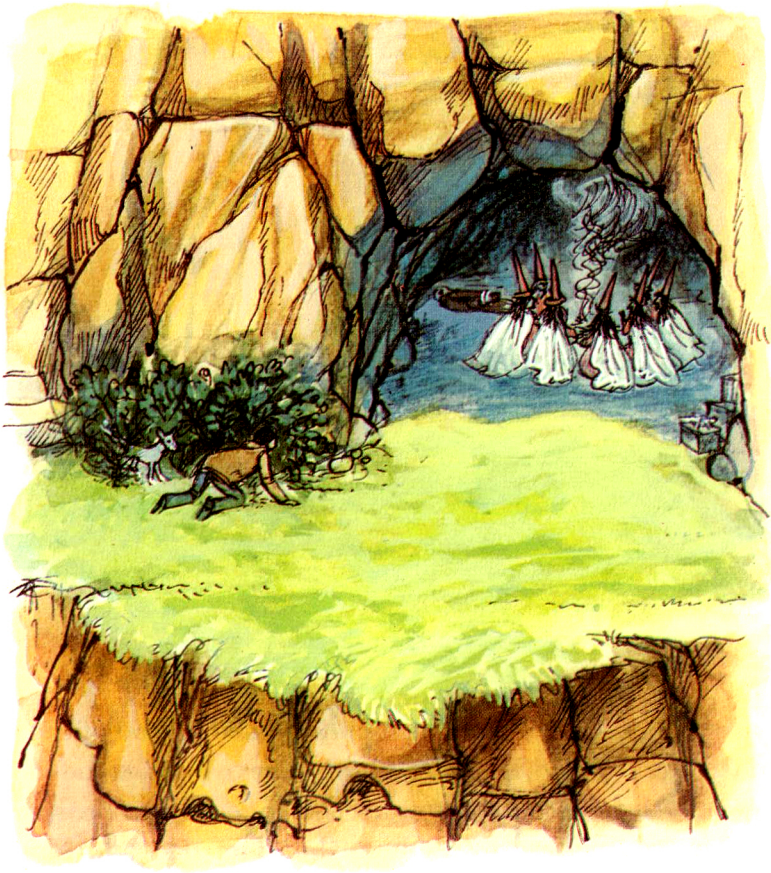


Sebastian went slowly down the steps, and Arun followed as silently as he could. He was sure that they were moving into danger. He only had to watch Sebastian, to know that.

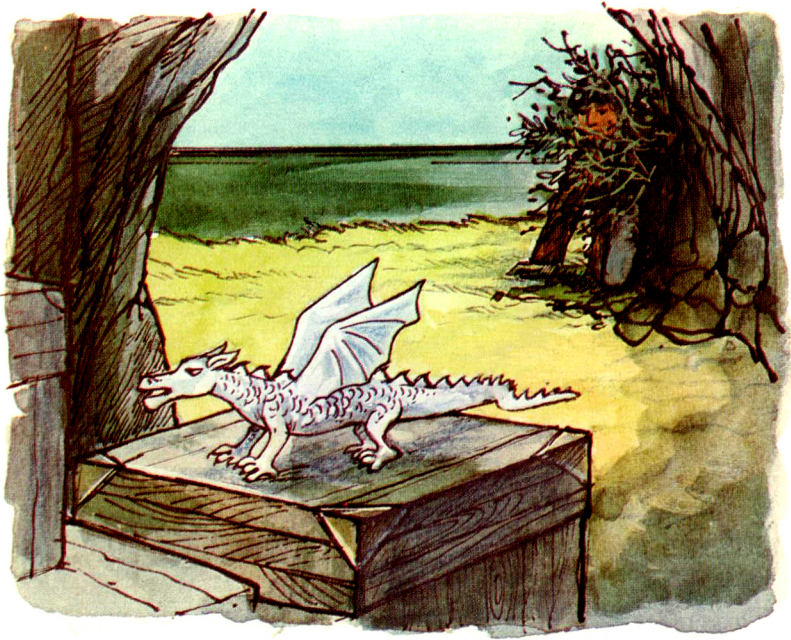
As they crept forward, Arun saw that the bushes grew in front of the mouth of a big cave. He crept in among them silently, following Sebastian. Sebastian led the way to a very thick bush, and then stopped. He looked up at Arun, but he didn't make a sound.

Arun could smell wood smoke, and hear little noises now, from inside the cave. Something or someone was there, not very far away. The shadows were so dark under the bushes, that Arun could only just see Sebastian, and he knew that he was well hidden himself.

Very quietly and carefully, he moved a branch of the bush to one side, and peered through.



The wind witches were sitting round a fire, a little way inside the cave. They were sitting with their backs to him. On the far side of the fire, Alan Tremaine lay on the rock floor. His hands and legs had been tied with a silver rope.



Arun saw some old wooden chests, piled on top of each other, at one side of the cave. Quite close to him, on the top of one of the chests, Arun saw a little ivory dragon.

Arun remembered something that Tim had told him. Tim had seen the wind witches once, when he was in the upper room of an old barn, and the wind witches were in the room below. Tim had looked down through a crack in the floor, and seen the wind witches making their magic. The ivory dragon was part of the magic. The witches used it to call up a wind.



The witches were all looking towards Alan, and the darkness at the back of the cave. Arun remembered that they hated the sunlight. Scarcely daring to breathe, he crept around the thick bush, and into the cave. If the witches turned, they could see him now. But the witches' backs were towards the bright sunshine outside the cave, and they didn't turn their heads. Arun forced himself to move slowly. He crept silently forwards, towards the ivory dragon.



A stick cracked in the fire. One of the wind witches reached sideways, to get more wood. As she did so, she half turned her head, and saw Arun.

As the witch gave a fierce cry, Arun leapt forward and seized the ivory dragon. Then, with the dragon in his hand, he sprang back to the mouth of the cave.

“Stay where you are!” he cried. “Stay where you are! If one of you moves, I’ll throw this dragon down the cliff and into the sea below!”



All the witches were facing him now. Their eyes glowed like fires, and their hands, like claws, were half up, as if they wanted to reach him and pull him in pieces. But they stopped where they were. Not a witch moved towards him.

The tallest witch held out her hand.

“Give it to me!” she hissed. “Give it to me, or I will turn you into a snake, as you stand there!”

Alan Tremaine’s voice came quietly from the far side of the fire.

“Don’t be afraid, Arun,” he said. “The wind witches can’t make their spells without the ivory dragon. Don’t be afraid.”

The witch spun round towards Alan. “We may not be able to make a spell, but we can kill the Strange Ones!” she cried. “Tell the boy to put the dragon down before I kill you!”

“Listen to me!” cried Arun. “If you touch Alan Tremaine, I’ll throw the ivory dragon down the cliffs.”

The witch turned slowly back towards him.

“What do you want?” she hissed.

“Set Alan Tremaine free, and I’ll give you back your ivory dragon,” said Arun.

The witches stood quite still, staring at Arun for a moment. Then six of them put their hands up to their eyes, as if the light hurt them. But the seventh witch, the tallest one, stared into Arun’s face. She held out her hand.

“Give me the dragon, and Alan Tremaine shall go free,” she said.

Arun shook his head. “Set him free first, and let him come out here to me,” he said.

“And then the two of you will run off with the dragon,” hissed the witch.



Arun shook his head again. “No, we won’t,” he said. “When Alan is free, we shall go back up the cliff. I’ll leave the ivory dragon there, on one of the big stones. You can get it after the sun has set, and by that time we shall be far away.”

“How do I know you won’t cheat me?” hissed the witch.

“You’ll have to trust me,” said Arun.

“I trust no one!” cried the witch.

“You’ll have to trust me,” said Arun. “There’s nothing else you can do. If you don’t let Alan go, I’ll throw the dragon down on the rocks. It will be smashed to pieces, and you’ll never be able to call the wind again!”

The seventh witch turned slowly back to look at Alan Tremaine. She moved round to the far side of the fire. The other six witches moved away, into the shadows at the sides of the cave.

The seventh witch picked up a thin stick of carved ivory. She pointed it towards Alan Tremaine.

For a second, Arun thought that she was going to kill him after all. But the witch cried out:

“Silver rope, that can hold and bind,
Let him go free, as free as the wind!”

The silver rope dropped to the floor, and Alan Tremaine got slowly to his feet, rubbing his wrists.

“Thank you, Arun,” he said quietly. He stepped past the fire, and joined Arun at the entrance to the cave.

“May all your prisoners go free, as I do, wind witches,” he said. “Come on, Arun. We must get as far away as we can before sunset.”

He pushed the bushes to one side, and held them. Arun, still holding the ivory dragon, stepped through the bushes and into the sunshine on the green ledge outside the cave.

“Rrrrrrrrrr!” said Sebastian, rubbing himself against Alan’s legs.

“Sebastian!” cried Alan. “I might have known you’d be here! But we haven’t time to talk now. Let’s get up the cliff, and get away.”

They climbed quickly up the stone steps to the top of the cliff. Sebastian kept close to Arun’s heels.

“I’ll leave the ivory dragon on top of that big stone,” said Arun. “The wind witches can’t get it before the sun sets, can they?”

“Not unless they can call up a storm which hides the sun,” said Alan. “And they can’t do that without the ivory dragon. You are going to keep your promise, even when it’s a promise made to the wind witches, are you?”

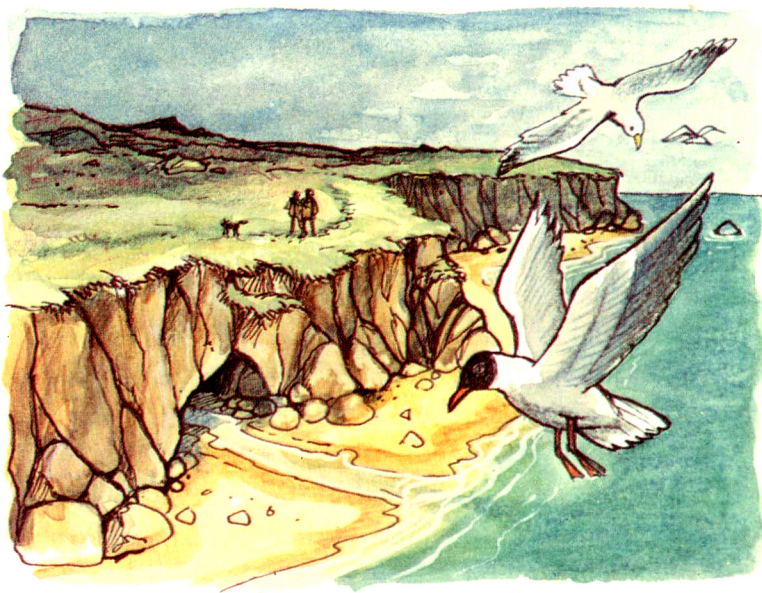
“I must,” said Arun.

Alan nodded. “You’re right,” he said. “Promises have to be kept, even when they’re made to your enemies. We’ve three or four hours before sunset, and I know a safe place for us then. Thank you, Arun. I shan’t forget. The wind witches would have shut me up in the stone prisons, with Nicola and Jeremy’s father and mother, if you hadn’t come. Leave the dragon on the rock in the sunshine. This way.”

Arun set the ivory dragon down on the top of a rock, and they set off, back along the sheep track, the way Arun and Sebastian had come.

They passed the cove, where the seal had brought Arun ashore, and the cave where the boat had been hidden. They kept on along the top of the cliff.

There were seagulls flying over the sands, and they stopped for a moment to watch them. The birds swung round over their heads, high above them, and then headed out to sea. Sebastian ran on ahead in the sunshine. Every now and then, he stopped to look back, to make sure they were coming.



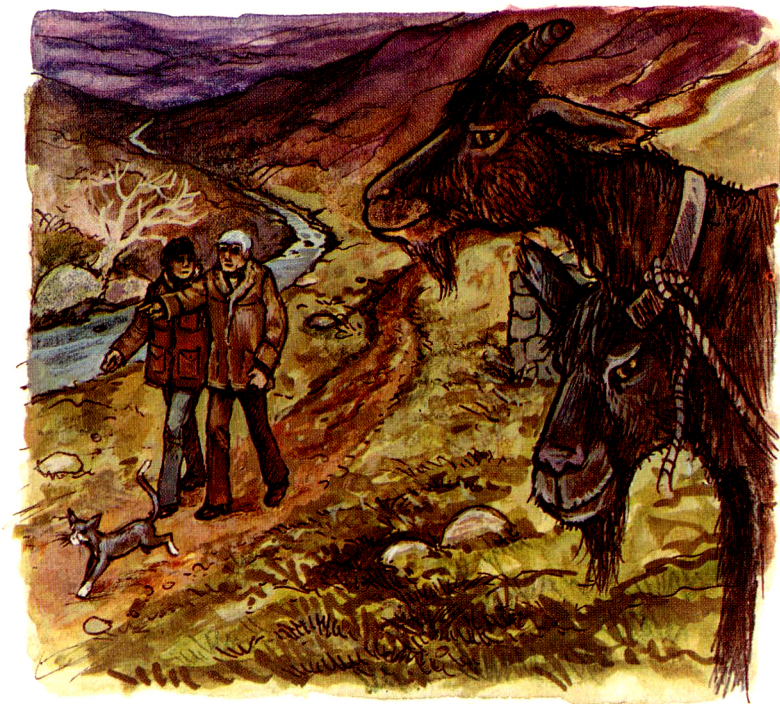
They found the stream that ran over the cliff, and drank some water. They were very tired, and very hungry. Arun felt almost faint from lack of food, but he knew that they must get to a safe place by sunset.

“It’s not much farther,” said Alan Tremaine, as they made their way along the cliff. “Can you do it, Arun?”

Arun nodded. “I think so,” he said. “I’ll try.” He stumbled, and Alan caught him.

“We could stop for a few minutes,” he said.

Arun shook his head. “I can’t rest, till we’re away from the wind witches,” he said. “I can go on.”

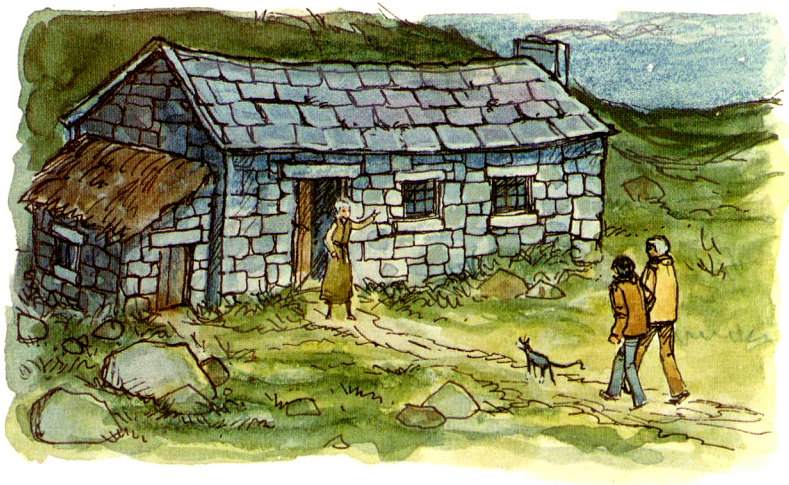


It was nearly an hour later, that they came to another cove, with a path leading down a little valley towards the sea.

There was a stream running down the valley, and the path ran beside it. As they went along the path, they came to a vegetable garden, with stone walls all around it.

A little farther on, there were three goats on the hillside, each tied with a long rope.

“We’re nearly there,” said Alan Tremaine.



They came round a corner, and saw a cottage. It was a long, low cottage, like Alan Tremaine's. Smoke was drifting up out of the chimney, and there was a wonderful smell of fresh bread.

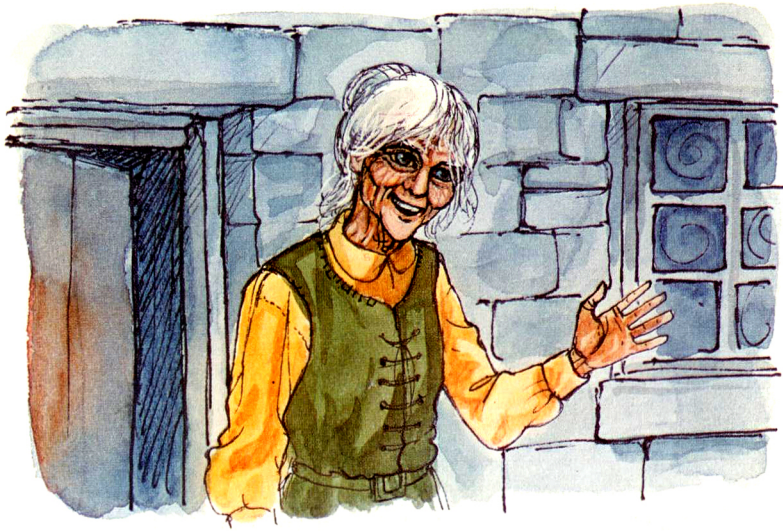
As they walked towards it, the door opened, and a woman came out. She was not very tall, and rather thin, and her skin was brown from being out in the sun and the wind.

"Alan!" she cried. "Alan Tremaine!"

"We've come to hide, Pen," said Alan Tremaine. "The wind witches are after us."

"Come inside then," cried Pen. "Come inside, Alan. You'll be safe enough here."

"Are you sure you want us to come in?" said Alan. "We bring danger with us."



“All the more reason to take you in, Alan,” said Pen. “Go in. I’ll get the goats in, if the witches are coming, and then I’ll be with you. Lock the door till I come.”

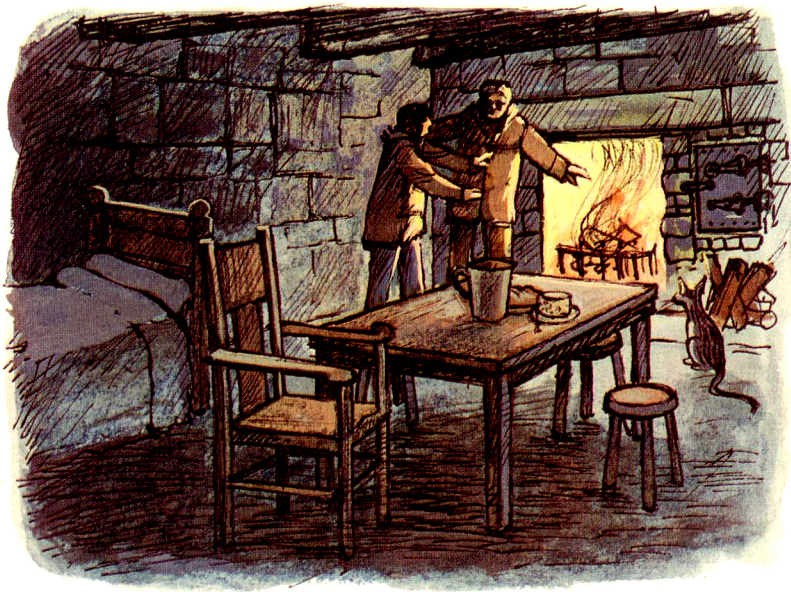
“There’s no need for that,” said Alan. “The witches won’t move till sunset, and the sun isn’t down yet.”

“Go in and wait for me, then,” said Pen. “I shan’t be long.”

She set off up the valley towards the three goats.

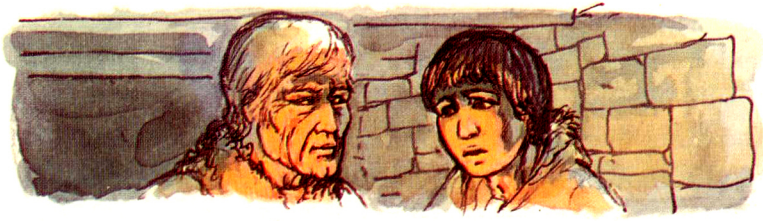
“Will she be all right?” asked Arun.

Alan nodded. “Pen has lived here all her life,” he said. “She’s one of the Strange Ones. She knows what to do when the witches are about. Let’s do as she says, and go in.”



Inside, the cottage was a little like Alan Tremain's, but there was no kitchen. There was just the one long room, with a fireplace at the end of it, and a big oven by the fire. A bed stood by the wall. There were some wooden stools, and a wooden chair. A table stood in the middle of the room. There was a loaf of bread on the table, a jug of milk, and a big, round cheese. The smell of fresh bread filled the cottage.

Arun followed Alan Tremain over to the fire, and they stood as close to it as they could. Their clothes were still damp from the sea, and they were glad of the fire.



“Alan,” said Arun. “Alan, what do you think has happened to Tim? I didn’t see him on the shore. The seals saved me. Do you think they saved him, too?”

“I don’t know, Arun, but I hope so,” said Alan Tremaine. “I think he must be alive. The wind witches would have known, if he had been drowned. Some of their creatures would have told them. Perhaps Tim is on Diaman’s Island.”

“Can the wind witches harm him?” asked Arun.

“They can call up a storm,” said Alan. “They can’t carry him off, as they carried me. But we must get out to Diaman’s Island as soon as we can, Arun. We can’t go tonight. The wind witches will be out looking for us, and we’re both so tired, that we have to sleep. We’ll sleep here tonight. Pen has a boat. She’ll lend it to us, I know. I’ve known her all my life. We’ll try and get there tomorrow.”

Sebastian was listening to everything Alan said. He gave a little purr, and curled up by the fire.

“Even Sebastian knows we can’t go now,” said Alan Tremaine. “We shall have to wait for the morning.”

The door opened, and Pen came in. She shut the door, and dropped a heavy wooden bar across it.

“I’ve put the goats in the shed at the side of the cottage, and hung their bells round their necks,” she said. “They’ll be safe enough there. The witches hate the bells. But what about you, Alan? Do the wind witches know you’re here?”

“They don’t know, but they’ll guess,” said Alan Tremaine. “They’ll be here tonight, Pen.”

“Let them come,” said Pen. She moved across to the chair, and sat down. “I’m not afraid of wind witches,” she said. “This cottage has stood against their storms before, and it will again. I’ve wood enough inside for a good fire, and now that the goats are safe, there’s not much the wind witches can do. We may have a storm, but that won’t hurt us. But what have you been doing, to have the wind witches after you? And who is the boy?”

“This is Arun,” said Alan quietly. “There’s another boy, too, called Tim. They’re both Ordinary Folk, Pen, but they can see the Hidden People. We were going to Diaman’s Island in my boat, when the wind witches came. They called up a storm, and sank the boat. We don’t know where Tim is.”

Pen stared at him. “But why were you going to Diaman’s Island?” she said. “You know how dangerous it is to go there.”

“We need silver water from Diaman’s Cave,” said Alan quietly.

Pen gripped the arms of her chair. “But why?” she cried. “Why do you want that?”

“The stone men have shut Gareth and Fiona in their stone prisons,” said Alan. “We need the silver water to break the stones and set them free.”

Pen stared at him.

“I don’t wonder that the wind witches are after you,” she said slowly. “I only wonder that you’re here alive.”

“You’ll help us, Pen?” asked Alan Tremaine. “We think Tim is on the island. Will you lend us your boat?”

Pen shook her head. “No,” she said. “No, I will not lend you the boat, Alan. I will take you there myself.”

“But – the wind witches sank my boat, Pen,” said Alan. “They may do the same with yours.”

Pen laughed. “All the more reason that I should be there to look after it,” she said. “You’ve lost your own boat, Alan, and I’ll not trust you with mine. I’ll take you to the island myself in the morning.” She smiled at them. “But now you must eat and sleep,” she said. “You both look as if you were half dead – and no wonder, with the wind witches after you. Let us eat now. We may have a few hours rest, before they come.”

“They?” asked Arun.

“The wind witches,” said Pen. “They’ll be here before morning, riding on the storm wind. But there’s nothing to be afraid of – this cottage was built to stand their storms.”

They sat down at the table, and Pen cut them large hunks of fresh bread, and chunks of white cheese made from goat's milk. They drank goat's milk too. Arun was so hungry that the bread and cheese and milk seemed to taste better than anything he had ever eaten before.

Then Pen gave them each a blanket, and a sack full of straw to lie on, and they lay down by the fire and went to sleep.



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E J Arnold